

Professional Education, Capabilities and the Public Good: The Role of Universities in Promoting Human Development

Alejandra Boni: Associate Professor and researcher at INGENIO Institute, Universitat Politècnica de València, Spain.

Final version of a paper which was published in 2014 in the Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, 15 (2-3), 291-292.

Book reviews

Professional Education, Capabilities and the Public Good: The Role of Universities in Promoting Human Development

Melanie Walker & Monica McLean

London and New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 212, ISBN 978-0-415-60471-0 (hbk), £85.00

Professional Education, Capabilities and the Public Good represents an extremely valuable contribution on the potential of higher education to enhance professional capabilities oriented towards the public good. It is based on comprehensive—and capability-inspired—research carried out in three South African universities in five professional fields (engineering, law, public health, theology and social work). Thus, this book can be a methodological source of inspiration for similar research in higher education and, moreover, adds to existing knowledge in the capability and university domain. It also provides a coherent account of past research and proposals presented by the authors.

One of the book's main contributions is the Public Good Professional Capability Index (developed in Chapter Five), which includes four elements: meta-functionings, professional capabilities, educational arrangements and context. This index has been developed throughout the research via an iterative process based on Ingrid Robeyns' methodology for elaborating a list of capabilities and, as the authors point out, has a

“prospective” intention (p. 56). That is to say, the index will be a useful tool for professional education and training.

Chapter One introduces the reader to the main debates relating to globalization, neo-liberalism and higher education, and also highlights how the neo-liberal market mechanism and “new managerialism” have led to the growing influence of economic pressures and the prioritization of economic capital in the field of university education. This book, on the contrary, could be included amongst those studies that deal with higher education as a public good understood as an institution whose values, practices and policies are consistent with social justice (p. 20).

Chapter Two resonates with the literature on professionalism. The main argument is to defend a notion of public good professionalism divergent from the mainstream perspective, grounded in capability theory and deeply contextual. Drawing on the South African example, the authors say that professionals must be engaged with social transformation, as suggested in different official documents and public speeches of South African authorities. One may wonder what would happen in other circumstances and a context dominated by a market-orientated views of professionalism, which may be the case in several countries nowadays.

Chapters Three to Five describe the content, theoretical framing and methodology. Chapter Three is especially valuable for those interested in the challenges of higher education in South Africa, approached through the human development lens. Chapters Four and Five are the most methodological and give detailed accounts of the research design and process, paying attention to how professional capabilities were chosen.

The reader will find an extensive description of the “dialogical and methodological approach” (p. 59) and the reflexive and participatory outlook that ties in with the critical tradition that “attempts connection between everyday lives and social structures that influence ideas and actions” (p. 60). In my view, this explicit and coherent link between capabilities and critical tradition is one of the major strengths of the book and is an illuminating contribution for those interested in the confluence of both approaches, particularly in the educational research domains. Chapters Four and Five exemplify how the list of eight professional capabilities (informed vision, affiliation, resilience, social and collective struggle, emotional reflexivity, integrity, assurance and confidence, and knowledge and skills) was obtained and how these eight capabilities are linked with other elements of the index: meta-functionings, educational arrangements and socio-historical conditions. This index is an example of an innovative contribution to the analysis of higher education that navigates, intelligently, between the more universalistic tradition of the capability

approach and the contextual one, including one aspect that is often underestimated in the capability literature: the socio-historical.

Chapters Six to Eight present evidence from some applications of the professional index. The first deals with professional capabilities and different disciplines, and includes an interesting description of how professions are understood using capabilities lenses. The authors conclude that there are common trends both at macro and micro levels. Professionals see themselves as a part of South Africa's great and ambitious project of social transformation while, at micro level, all realize the importance of transforming human relationships to foreground equality, respect and dignity. On the contrary, differences emerge in specific capabilities such as informed vision, social and collective struggle, informed knowledge and affiliation.

Chapter Seven discusses educational arrangements that encompass issues relating to curriculum, pedagogies and departmental and university culture. Through the description of these arrangements in the five universities, Walker and McLean highlight different strategies to foster professional capabilities. The final discussion summarizes commonalities and differences among the five cases but, in some ways, lacks clarity on precisely the main topic of the chapter. The main issue is how educational arrangements are linked to the expansion of professional capabilities and, after having presented the five cases, a more specific discussion would have been helpful for one of the book's goals: to inspire transformational pathways in higher education (see the final chapter).

Chapter Eight deals with social constraints on public good professionalism in South Africa and includes a more detailed discussion on the topic. Elements presented and discussed in the chapter are: the lack of social diversity among the students, differences in the mission and traditions of universities, disinclination to practice as a public good professional, lack of knowledge and shortage of skills, and uncoordinated efforts.

Finally, Chapter Nine places the book within a perspective that advocates the transformation of institutions through individual and collective action. As Walker and McLean remark: "there can be no social pathways to public good professionalism without individuals whose personal trajectories have been shaped by their experiences, including their university education, to walk the public good professional pathways into existence" (p. 169). They also suggest a threefold practical strategy relating to good professional governance, professional attitudes, and making social pathways in practice and sustained them. However, they do not provide a robust explanation of the reasons for selecting these three strategies in the first place, which arguably warrants a more detailed discussion. In any case,

this book deserves a careful reading from those involved in the transformation of higher education institutions in both practical and research-oriented arenas. *Professional Education, Capabilities and the Public Good* can be a fruitful and enriching source of inspiration.

***Alejandra Boni* © 2014**

*Associate Professor and researcher at INGENIO Institute, Universitat
Politécnica de València, Spain
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2014.906216>*